



1404 E. Yesler Way, Suite 203
Seattle, WA 98122
(206)686-7252
Fax (206)903-0675
www.seattlecommlaw.org

June 27, 2018

Cory Sbarbaro
Group Health Foundation

SENT VIA: info@grouphealthfoundation.org

Lessons Learned From Community Engagement

The Seattle Community Law Center is a specialty civil legal aid program that provides high quality civil legal aid to people living with disabilities who are also homeless or low-income. We help people when they have problems obtaining or maintaining access to Social Security and the associated Medicaid or Medicare. The outcomes of our work include equitable access to income for people with disabilities and access to healthcare.

SCLC assesses the needs and barriers of disabled persons in King County and the greater Puget Sound area, maintaining targeted projects to address the barriers faced by vulnerable populations in Western Washington. SCLC makes direct legal representation accessible at the convenience of the client, and we assist in the benefits application and appeals process in a way that accommodates their disability and other barriers they may face. SCLC builds workable advocacy plans for clients that face poverty, language barriers, homelessness, limited transportation, and mental illness.

SCLC believes that advocacy for every client should include a strategy to make lasting improvements in their ability to achieve stable access to healthcare, housing, and economic security. SCLC maintains partnerships with all civil legal aid organizations in Washington, King County advocacy groups, legal service providers, and the U.S. government on behalf of disabled persons near the poverty line. SCLC rights the recurrent denial of disability benefits, and helps navigate the administrative process quickly and with compassion.

1. How have you engaged, convened, and maintained relationships with your community/communities?

SCLC identifies communities that are in need of our services by looking at internal and external data. We then work with our network of stakeholders to identify well established community partners who serve a large number of individuals who may need our services. Sometimes the community based organization may approach us to ask if we will offer services onsite at their locations for their clients. When we created the Mobile Legal Unit, we provided education and information to targeted audiences and we were invited by several organizations to incorporate our services into their models. Regardless of how the relationships started, after having a conversation with those organizations to determine we were a good fit, we began building a plan for working together to meld our services into an existing structure at their locations. This

requires a seriously high degree of flexibility on the part of SCLC to serve as one missing puzzle piece that is well fit and easily incorporated into other services. Candidly, this type of flexibility is unique and a trademark of our work. It requires us to become acutely aware of the culture present at our outreach locations so that we can become part of a greater whole. These services have been successful first at Downtown Emergency Service Center, Compass Housing Alliance, and Chief Seattle Club. More recently, these services are successful in South King County at multiple locations of Multi Service Center, and at Open Door for MultiCultural Families.

2. How have you co-designed or co-created solutions with your community/communities? Ultimately, we must be invited to offer the important advocacy that we provide to individuals with disabilities on site at community outreach locations. If they do not see value in the services we offer, they will not find a use for our work onsite. Initiating these relationships by offering free trainings to social service staff is typically a way to generate support for these services. Once we caseworkers and social workers start to understand the level of advocacy required to be successful in Social Security cases (from application, all the way through the appeals process), they will often state out loud that they do not possibly have enough hours in the day to do that kind of advocacy while also performing the critically important work that they are already doing. These talented individuals are masters at recruiting people into the success of each of their clients. We are so incredibly grateful to Group Health Foundation for making it possible for us to be able to say “yes!” We can probably work together to help this client achieve their goals.

Once we have funding, we can start building a plan that can seamlessly incorporate our work into their existing business model. The co-design process really takes place around the creation of structure for scheduling, meeting with clients, and building a strong evidentiary record for the clients’ Social Security cases. This type of partnership serves several important purposes. It creates a self-defined safe place for clients to meet with us where they are already receiving one or more other types of services. It also provides an opportunity for a client to build more than one successful working relationship in their lives. So many of our homeless clients have been in relationships with people who failed them, which has served to establish a pattern in their lives of not trusting other people – particularly lawyers and people in authoritative positions. This breaks down those barriers. Also, a strong agency bond that driven by client requests serves to help strengthen the evidentiary record in their Social Security case which helps to expedite the success of the client’s goal of accessing benefits to which they are eligible.

3. How have you addressed systematic inequities that affect health (such as power differentials or racism) as part of your community engagement work? This model was created by centering our clients needs. Certainly, the practice of law, much like the practice of medicine, is built on “efficiency” – for the lawyer or business. Typically, a business will advertise publicly and wait for the clients to call or knock on the door. As a relationship progresses, the client must follow through on their own desire to get help by meeting the business more than half way and doing so in a timely fashion. A missed appointment will often times trigger a letter offering the client ten days to respond and a consequence of closing and withdrawing from the case. We don’t do that.

Second and third chances levels the playing field for clients that have a different cultural understanding of how the relationship should work. Further, our model is built to accommodate

clients who are spending a lot of time at doctors offices, waiting in line for food or shelter, or who experience significant anxiety when faced with having to meet a deadline or show up or meet with an officer of the court. Further still, we learn a great deal from our community partner organizations about what works for the unique population that they serve. We are able to incorporate this cultural competence into our delivery of legal services.

4. What about your organization's way of working has made you successful? How has your organizational culture or structure changed to allow for authentic community relationships? Include examples of how your staff and your board (if relevant) contributed to the culture and values that enabled your success.

The information I have described above outlines a number of way that our services become successful through the incorporation of community partners and by centering the needs and experiences of our clients. In addition to these practical yet unique systems we have put in place, there are two major contributing factors to our success: excellent reputation and reflecting our client population in the staff of SCLC.

SCLC has received personal messages from clients, community partners, grantors, judges that we appear before, and other Social Security workers that we are delivering the highest quality Social Security advocacy. The integrity of the services we offer are well known among our colleagues and within the Social Security and other government systems that we navigate through.

Since our application for a grant, SCLC has increased the percentage of our staff that reflect our clients of color from 17% to 50%. We cannot claim yet that this is having a measurable impact on the cases we are working on. However, all good data, and literature clearly indicate that this will serve to improve the quality, capacity, and strength of our services. We hope to have the opportunity as our relationship with Group Health Foundation to chart progress on this in the coming years.

5. What have been your most significant challenges, obstacles, and missteps? We know that we can learn as much from setbacks as we can from successes, so please don't hold back! (If you are concerned about sharing challenges publicly, just let us know and we will omit your response to this question from the version we share publicly.)

As shared in our grant application, our biggest near mis-steps were: 1) making assumptions about our data without looking at it; 2) putting a really good idea into motion without first building authentic relationships with community partners and asking them if they think it is a good idea. Luckily, with the help of a community of colleagues who are focused on race equity work, we learned these lessons and correct course prior to executing on a project.

Making Assumptions.

SCLC staff had an assumption that the great majority of the people we served were people of color and that we were serving a very high percentage of people in South King County. This assumptions was based upon perception, and also upon our readings and understanding of studies on poverty in King County and on Social Security recipient demographics. We were simply

wrong. When we went to look at our own data to support this conclusion, we learned quickly that although the studies about poverty and about Social Security recipient demographics were true, our data did not reflect the population most in need. This led to a shift in our grant applications from asking for more funds to do more of the good work we are doing, to seeking grant funding to provide services in the geographic locations in highest need and to improve the equitable access to our services for people of color.

Centering and Including Communities In Need.

We had this wonderful idea to build a Mobile Legal Unit and deliver Mobile Legal Services from a Justice Bus, an accessible van that is retrofitted into a law office and can be driven anywhere, particularly South King County. The idea is to drive into a community where there is great need and offer our services at high need locations where people are already receiving other services (libraries, grocery stores, and homeless encampments). This is still a good idea. However, it is really only a good, and successful, idea if our community partners in South King County believe it to be a necessary and helpful extension of what we have already started doing in those locations. Driving into a community to deliver service and drive away, without telling anyone or connecting with a broader community based network is not a great idea. We are grateful to our thought partners in equity who helped us realize this oversight so that we can be of better service and value to the communities in need.

6. What changes have you seen that give you hope about a future that is more equitable?

This moment, day, month, year, decade, etc., is not the only moment in history when a community has fought against poverty and inequitable, even discriminatory, access to government benefits or healthcare. It is not the only moment in history when “justice is blind” has taken on more than one meaning. One indicator that I find incredibly hopeful, is that the human services delivery systems and the legal system are beginning to utilize and also deeply understand the difference between equality and equity. Not just individual providers, but the systems as a whole. This kind of systemic shift makes me hopeful. If service providers are able to make this distinction and apply it to planning and service delivery, and I believe they are, then I believe we are on the right path.

As hope relates to this project directly, the resilience and spirit of our clients is what keeps hope driving forward for us. They tell us that the successes that we achieve together with them makes the difference in their lives, and that makes our work feel worth it. It makes us want to do more. Our clients are excited about our efforts to raise money to create a Justice Bus. When they learn about our idea, they come up with all kinds of creative ideas and enthusiasm for our thoughtful approach to a typical area of law. We are looking forward to making this program a reality.

Thank you for the opportunity to candidly share and for offering the opportunity to “learn together.” We look forward to working with you more in the months and years to come.

Sincerely,

Alex KF Doolittle
Executive Director